



Cheney's speech in Vilnius – Why the EU should act differently?

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Last week's speech by the US vice-president Richard Cheney in Vilnius poses several questions among which the one asking who should have listened most carefully seems to be appropriate.

Perhaps anticipating the failure of the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany to agree on Iranian nuclear program, US official attempted to score points on Russia. With a discourse criticizing Moscow over the undemocratic tendencies towards the civil society and referring to Russia's oil and gas as "tools of intimidation and blackmail", the speech was provocative¹, recalling the Kennan's Cold war logic and far from being sensitive to the usual way the Russians read the international politics now. It aimed primarily at the post-soviet countries², however it is questionable the post-soviet space is truly connected to the belief the US is willing to use its power and resources to promote freedom and democratization as part of its foreign policy towards Russia when the US-EU-Russia-China clash of oil and gas interests in the post-soviet space is under way for some time already.

Criticizing Lukashenko's regime in Belarus and praising Nursultan Nazarbaiev³, Cheney's visit continued from Vilnius to Kazakhstan. His stay overlapped with the EU Energy

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¹ Financial Times, Quentin Peel, Cheney miscalculates with cold war scolding of Russia, p. 2, May 9 2006.

² Including the Baltic EU member states

³ Prime example for those who like to point at the US' double standard approach

Commissioner Andris Piebalgs mission. During his visit, Cheney described Kazakhstan as a "key strategic partner of the United States". The true is both high-profile visits to the central Asia had two main reasons – oil and gas. European companies are most interested in gas supplies from Kazakhstan and the US in trans-Caspian oil pipeline. The creation of trans-Caspian oil and gas transport systems is a key issue. The project, which would enable Kazakhstan to export its oil through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, was delayed largely due Russia's monopolization of oil transit from Kazakhstan. The gas pipeline would connect to Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline, with further connection to Greece and Italy, or to Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Austria⁴.

As some point out, Kazakhstan would better withstand Russia's opposition to the oil pipeline project, if the other eastern Caspian country (Turkmenistan) participates as well and the disputable democracy and human rights records should not be of primary policy concern. As the US analyst from the Hudson Institute's Zeyno Baran remarked: "If the US continues to balk at dealing with leaders of energy-producing countries because of democracy concerns, then soon there won't be any more democracies in the region to participate with. You can say all you want about how we will not take part in these great games, but Russia and China are taking part in them, and the United States risks losing out"⁵.

Even if the energy policy is the key issue, EU aspirations in the post-soviet countries are much more complex. Given its nature, EU can make these countries transform. That is what should be done but how does reality look like? How does the EU assert its transformative power⁶? In this regard, there are two crucial set of questions which have to be addressed – EU policy and discourse on Russia where copying the latest US example would be rather counterproductive and the commitments EU is ready to make vis á vis the rest of the post-soviet countries.

Russia is insecure of its position in the international system suffering heavily from post-imperialism, with both factors contributing to the sensitivity towards any signs of western

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⁴ The European Commission will be asked soon by the Kazakhstan authorities to commission a feasibility study for this project. See "Cheney visit spotlights pivotal Kazakh role", <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=15769>

⁵ Cheney visit spotlights pivotal Kazakh role, www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=15769

⁶ Term used by Mark Leonard, in: Leonard, Mark, *Why Europe will run the 21st Century*, Harper Collins, London, 2005.

tendencies to dominate in the area Russia perceives to be its sphere of interests⁷. It seems reasonable Russia should embrace the logic of safe and stable zone of neighboring countries with process of democratization on the way and respect to the international norms. In reality, Russia does not pursue such a policy at all. That is actually a state favored in a way by both cold war ex-powers in order to manage their interests. But post-soviet space is not now a monolithic set of countries, especially when it comes to relations with the EU, as well as the US and Russia.

Focusing on the Black see region, some speak of the persistent Soviet mentality as one of the factors determining the ambivalent attitudes towards Russia in these countries, especially in case of the states Russia sided with their adversaries during a conflict, like Azerbaijan. History and certain emotional ties play role in the region. Russian language is and will for some time remain the lingua franca of the region. Taking Azerbaijan as an example again, even the civil society which promotes the western norms and inclusion into the sphere of respect to western values is split on the issue of close cooperation with Russia. The commitment of these countries to the western democratic norms is not granted. Lack of vision as well as the other factors - like looking at the way the negotiations with Turkey go in case of Azerbaijan, can lead to the reluctance of all parts of the societies towards the EU.

With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, the Black See region will gain salience in the EU foreign policy. The situation in the region is complicated and the Caucasus states need a commitment EU is at the moment unable to deliver. European Neighborhood policy (ENP) is also often not perceived the way EU meant it; it is rather seen as a hidden enlargement policy. One can even hear the dates of the EU accession being set. Lastly, from a Georgian side when an official stated the country would join the EU by 2020 with the elite discourse copying the “return to Europe” of the CEE countries at the beginning of the 1990’s.

The countries in the Black see region and Central Asia display continued structural weakness of the post-communist and post-soviet system, corrupted public administration and weak local governance, small capability of effective and adequate strategic planning, persisting unresolved issues of divisions of competencies and responsibilities, unfinished legislative

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⁷ Moscow does not hesitate to bully the former soviet republics especially in the trade issues imposing bans on import of popular commodities like wine and other from these countries to Russia; last case is in this sense Moldova and Georgia.

frameworks and lacks of control mechanisms. EU expects the countries to deal with their transformation burden within its assistance through ENP.

Even though it is understandable at the moment there is no will to make any further enlargement commitments on the EU side with the absorption capacity debate on the way, part of which is the public opinion in the EU member states, the policy towards the post-soviet countries should not be overlooked. It is true that when the CEE states articulated the goal of the EU membership, the Union did not open its arms quickly. The membership requires complex process of transformation. Had the EU encouraged abundantly the CEE, it would have been counterproductive for their democratization and economic development. Nevertheless, the situation in the Black sea region, which will be the crucial post-soviet space for the EU in the near future, is different. With the ENP and the action plans deliberations as the only tools, EU cannot expect a voluntary pursuing and surveillance over its principles by these states. The desire to join the EU-sphere must be kept. EU stakes are high and the Russian alternative still strong.

Russia still displays characteristics of an empire. Centralized power is getting weaker with the distance from the power centre, with the sphere of influence behind its borders and a constantly and historically present fear of territorial shrinking, which is being prevented by expansive politics. Together with its insecurity it creates a mix any similar speech to the one Richard Cheney made can do only harm. One should realize the Cheney's speech was done in the US interest, not on behalf of the transatlantic community of values or the post-soviet countries or with an incentive to make Russia truly more democratic. And Russia perceives it as hypocrisy. Unfortunately, the way the EU behaves in the post-soviet space can make a similar impression due to the interests in gas and oil, and not only in Russia itself but also in the post-soviet countries.

All post-soviet countries but the Baltic countries have to make a strategic calculation how to best preserve their national and economic interests, some like Kazakhstan chosen American engagement in order to balance the Russian influence, others made a policy turn in this sense. In terms of security and economic engagements, China aspires to play more important role in the Central Asia in the near future, too.

The EU policy on Russia is the key. Countering the country the same way US just showed would be counterproductive. EU has to work on simultaneous transformation of Russia itself by engaging it more and more in the standard set of rules governing the Union and by clarifying the commitment to the post-soviet countries, naturally differentiating in the intensity of relations between Black Sea region and Central Asia. The critique of Russia will sound more relevant being a part of constant pressure and leveraging the actual Russian commitments, too.

Despite the main obstacles in the EU–Russia policy, which is the EU being chronically incapable to formulate coherent approach towards Russia, with the clashes not only among the member states but also with the European Commission and European Parliament who takes the most idealistic policy line, the record is not discouraging. The PCA was concluded in 1994. General and toothless EU Common Strategy on Russia from 1999 was replaced in 2003 by the well known policy of four spaces when Russia turned down the option of being included under the ENP roof and a strategic partnership, confining to Russia's feeling of exclusivity was established. EU succeeded with a neat deal on Kaliningrad, the extension of the PCA of the ten new member states was exchanged for Russia's WTO membership support with the bilateral trade agreement, a prerequisite for Russia's WTO entrance, concluded just in May 2004 after six years of negotiations and at the same time Russia also agreed to access the Kyoto protocol. EU even managed to succeed with its strategy how to translate the agreements into the policies⁸. And that is the way forward in relations with Russia, slow but steady and insistent.

⁸ EU proposed one action plan covering the policies in all four spaces, meanwhile Russia strived to keep the spaces as separate as possible in order to pick and choose the issues and areas where the approximation is truly beneficial for Russia. At the first sight, the cooperation follows the principles Russia wanted to anchor but on the practical level the EU package approach, so typical for the deliberations in the EU, took over.